

MONSTROUS FEMALE AUTHORSHIP IN GOTHIC LITERATURE: THE RODENT-WOMAN IN FEDERICO ANDAHAZI'S *THE MERCIFUL WOMEN*

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The primordial relationship between writer and reader presents a wonderful paradox: in creating the role of the reader, the writer also decrees the writer's death, since in order for a text to be finished, the writer must withdraw, cease to exist. While the writer remains present, the text remains incomplete. Only when the writer relinquishes the text, does the text come into existence. At that point, the existence of the text is a silent existence, silent until the moment in which a reader reads it. (...)

All writing depends on the generosity of the reader.

— Alberto Manguel. *A History of Reading*, 179.

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Victor Frankenstein is still a *haunted* man. Beginning in the Swiss mountains, the scientist throws himself at the mission to *hunt* “his” monster with a view to terminate him. *Haunted* by the possibility of monstrous progeny, he finds his *hunt* just and morally correct. However, Mary Shelley, the female author who controlled her male creations in the manner Frankenstein wished he could control his, succeeded in making the monster thrive and prosper. In spite of all attempts against his life, Frankenstein's monster lives well beyond the 1818 novel. Gaining mythic quality, authors now wish to make him live longer though still wanting to appropriate themselves of his bodily and symbolic meaning. In that perspective, the monster is still hunted as well. From Brian Aldiss to Katherine Dunn, Garfield Reeves-Steven and Kurt Vonnegut, authors continue to struggle for a piece of him, trying to snatch him from Mary Shelley's arms, his mother. This paper presents another rewriting, another snatch if you will, but one that is aware of the issues concerning female authorship and anxiety as well as the sexual politics of the literary industry. With *The Merciful Women* (2000), Federico Andahazi questions not only

Frankenstein's parenthood but of all Gothic creatures — the monster's siblings — by fictionally recreating a key moment in literary his/tory.

Though the novella introduced the vampire to the English literary world, *The Vampyre* (1819) by John Polidori has gone down in history as a lesser achievement when compared to that other monstrous creation generated during the mythic stormy night in the Swiss Alps when Lord Byron, the Shelleys and the former's secretary, Polidori, presented the results of a group competition. In fact, whilst both *The Vampyre* and *Frankenstein* have fathered numerous and exhilarating children (for instance, Bram Stoker's 1897 *Dracula*), the former has remained in such obscurity that even its own paternity is discussed. Published originally under Lord Byron's name, there followed successive rejections of authorship on the part of the celebrated poet and claims on the part of Polidori, a feeble-minded doctor whose obsession and envy of Byron's talent was widely known. In Andahazi's novel, the monster is an animal-woman of undefined species and elusive traits. Her father describes her as a compound of tadpole, bat (84) and rat (85) and Polidori as an "anthropomorphic reptile" (165). In her own view, the monstrous female has the (positive) traits of gothic animals or, as she calls them, "creatures of the depths": her appetite is as that of rats for books, her sense of opportunity as that of bats (88). She is also watchful as a cockroach, patient as a spider, and resilient as mice which are able to cross vast distances (88). She will need those extraordinary qualities to survive as she and her sisters will travel across Europe in the hope to find the "nutrient" she needs. Because of it, Annette Legrand ("the great") is made to travel like a caged animal.

Andahazi's chimerical woman is not merely physically monstrous; the monstrosity is primarily ontological and, again like Shelley's monster, directly linked to birth issues. The Cinderella *topos* is subverted to describe the animal-woman and her two sisters' most unusual birth:

They [two baby girls] were joined back to back by a horrendous pustule, a link of flesh that looked vaguely human. Terrified, I [the father] saw this thing stirring by itself, contracting and dilating as if it were breathing. When I lifted the infants in my arms, they separated as if by magic [...]. The thing between them fell to the flooded floor and floated away to a corner of the room. I tried to tell myself that its movements were involuntary [...] yet something convinced me it had a life of its own. [...] I could swear that the horrible creature was looking at me. [...] [M]y dead wife lying on

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the table, my daughters in my arms, that freak looking at me with evil eyes and I, all alone. (84. Italics in the text)

The scene described in a letter to one Doctor Frankenstein replicates the birth of Mary Shelley's monster from the atmosphere to the absence of the mother (in this case she dies, like Mary Wollstonecraft) and to the rejection of the newborn on the part of the father who "gives birth" by pulling the children out of the womb. Even the detail of the expressive (supposedly evil) eyes and the convulsive motion are there. Immediately too, the father is decided on destroying his monstrous offspring. The father steps on "the thing" intending to kill it but realises that the two perfect daughters start to die as well; against his will, he will let the creature live. Like Frankenstein's monster, the she-creature will grow up hidden, alone and unloved. Unlike her beautiful twin sisters, she will not benefit from an education but (again like in the hypertext) her extraordinary intellectual abilities will allow her to learn by spying on her sisters' private lessons. But at this point the convergence of the monsters' experience is broken: Shelley's creature craves for knowledge so that he develops communication skills to be brought closer to humanity (his own human self and as far as human contact goes); Andahazi's monster is only too happy to indulge in her solitude and, in fact, her dependency on other humans is to her an obstacle. Living in secrecy in passageways and cellars, she feeds *literally* on books. She feasts on Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and dines on his *Exemplary Novels* among other literary treasures simply because they give her pleasure (91). Fighting against rats (likely symbols of censorship and human negligence regarding literary memory) she becomes, she says, "the most ravenous beast of the pack" (90). Instead of fighting them physically, she defeats them with another consuming metaphor:

I read for days on end. Every time I finished a page, I would tear it out, stuff it in my mouth, and devour it in one bite. I soon learned to distinguish the taste and nutrient qualities of each author, each text, each school and each movement. And in my constant battle against the rats, the more I resembled them, the more human I felt. Just as Homo Sapiens evolved from consumption of raw flesh to cooked meat, so I passed from devouring books to savouring them. (90-91. Italics in the text)

The she-monster constructs her humanness via animal appearance and behaviour. The strategy to achieve that end is literature. The ruse used to address the transition from readership (consumption) to

authorship is the creature's freakishness. She is not attractive, she is not acceptable, she is not appropriate. However, the impossibility of feminine authorship is deconstructed by her discovery of The Reading Machine. The machine was built by a man who aspired to write the perfect novel; to that purpose he developed a mechanical device which could identify the faults and qualities of texts and quite simply stamped them as "publishable" or unpublishable". The irony was that once this man had gathered enough information, his supposedly perfect novel is deemed unpublishable and in an effort to avoid the disgraceful stamp, he protects the manuscript with his own body and gets squashed (a mirror image of Annette's father trying to squash her). Besides the unspoken warnings about a mechanized society which are also inherited from *Frankenstein*, this story-within-a-story is illuminating regarding the logic of the book industry which is governed by financial and gender politics. "If I could only describe", writes the monster, "the marvels revealed to me in those pages condemned to death even before being born... I assure you the history of Western literature would be transformed and made more glorious" (95). Presumably one of the transformations would be the inclusion of more women authors like herself who, we learn later, is the author of all the texts of the phoney writers at Villa Diodati as well as of Pushkin, E. T. W. (or A.) Hoffman, Ludwig Tieck among many others. The issue of female authorship is therefore at the core of both *Frankenstein* and *The Merciful Women* insofar as:

The dominant Western patriarchal tradition has claimed and consecrated cultural production as a male preserve with authorship always a question of literary paternity and the text almost always a son (...). As God the Father engendered the universe and man (Adam) and authored the book of nature and the Bible, so the (male) writer appropriates both paternity and authorship, so he attributes to himself the conception of both physical and textual progeny. And there is more, for just as the divine creation complicates and confounds the distinction between the literal and the figurative (between history and mystery, between embodiment and the Word), so literary creation asserts that it too makes the word flesh, that writing is an instance of procreation. Authorship *is* paternity, and vice versa. (Regosin, 1996: 183. Italics in the text)

Through the she-monster Andahazi tries to disprove this long-lasting dynamics of the publishing industry. However, she could be regarded as doubly un-maternal: unpublishable because she is a woman but simultaneously non-motherly because her ugliness prevents her from being approached by a man. And yet she is fully

dependent on semen. If she does not drink it (drinking semen being a derivative form of book consumption), she will die and so will her sisters. The device of the animal-woman allows Andahazi to raise often conflicting questions such as the patriarchal notion of women's utter dependency on men (ridiculed through literalism) and, on a more specific level, the repressed role of women in world's literature and, ultimately, of their literary capacities. The novel is constructed from the prism of the relationship of Polidori and his mysterious correspondent who exchanges the texts with which the disturbed secretary hopes to raise himself above Lord Byron for the "elixir of life" (70). The male-oriented stereotype of literary creation and of valorisation of masculinity to provide meaning to life in general is evident in Annette's confession about what she sadly cannot do without. It is expressed in suitably gothic mannerist exaggeration reminiscent of the Frankensteinian speeches:

I need the seed of life: the fluid that carries it through time, the vital substance that grants life to the dead through their off-spring and holds within it not only the animal force of instinct but also the intangible lightness of the soul, the traits of our long-vanished ancestors and the character of those to come after we have gone; that which is written in the flesh of the first man and that which will also be written in the last, for ever and ever; the inheritance that condemns us to the end of our days to be that which we must be; the irrevocable legacy that grants us life itself, as firmly as it tears that same life from us in the end; that which carries in its sweet flow the germ of everything we are — I mean the essential fluid that only men possess. (69-70)

The Merciful Women represents therefore an illumination on what Harold Bloom has referred to as the anxiety of influence (1973), or in the preface to the 1996 edition as the anxiety of contamination, a metaphor more akin to the gothic taste. Bloom suggests, meaningfully taking only male poets, male characters and male heroes from literary history to build his theory, that the poet, an aspiring creator, suffers from the anxiety that he himself is some other poet's creature. Great poets overcome that anxiety and subdue their fatherly precursors who in turn try to repress their offspring (accordingly Byron constantly abuses and humiliates Polidori but even more interestingly we are reminded that Annette's father tried to squash her). Critics, namely Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, have noted how this is a misogynist and patriarchal viewpoint, no doubt, one could add, because of Bloom's own relationship of influence with Freud:

[A] literary text is not only speech quite literally embodied, but also power mysteriously made manifest, made flesh. In patriarchal Western culture, therefore, the text's author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis. (Gilbert and Gubar: 1979, 6)

But like Gilbert and Gubar also note, it is the power to generate and to create posterity. The novel also concerns itself with this matter through Polidori whose fragile ego and mental instability make him obsess over becoming more famous than his "master" whom he regards as a second-rate poet. Because of this thirst for glory and celebrity (174), Polidori is willing to be vampirised by a revolting being but due to the obsession with subduing his "father" he has become vampiric for her stories too. He needs them (and her, a female) to defeat his "father" figure and become a "father" himself:

Was it not true (...) that literary works are the children of their authors? Why then not agree that he was the father of those pages, since he had literally spent his seed in order to give life to each of those fictional characters? He was literally, not metaphorically, the true author of *The Vampyre* and now, willing to multiply and filled with paternal longings, he offered himself as the progenitor of new and sombre creatures of the word. (174)

Polidori is consumed by "corrosive envy" towards his "father" and his acclaimed literary gift, towards whom he behaves submissively and whom ironically he dreams to plagiarise (49) and behead (161). In the Oedipal configuration (Bloom calls it Hamlet complex), Polidori is the son (interestingly Andahazi is the son of a Hungarian psychoanalyst and poet). Nonetheless, there is a place for a son in the gender-politicised universe of literature, whereas there is not one for daughters and even less for mothers. In the literary world, men speak sentences, women are sentenced (fated, imprisoned); men frame thoughts, women are framed (enclosed in texts and found wanting) (Gilbert and Gubar, 13). Women are therefore kept at bay from any form of authorship or author/ity, hence from, as the expression goes, attempting the pen/is. In the same manner, Annette has no access to vaginal sex but she does have to men's penises through imaginative strategies which escalate from joint collaboration to rape men, to drugs and eventually to murder. The vampiric action (sucking blood/semen) and their murderous consequences are, like Elizabeth Báthori's (nicknamed the "Blood Countess") whom Annette invokes (48), necessary, not an expression of evilness. It could be said then, that a woman writes and very literally she causes the death of the

(male) author. She gets the penises and the pen as it is she who writes Polidori, Byron and the Shelleys' texts. Because the literary gift is so inherently masculine, when this "creative energy appears in a woman, it may be anomalous, freakish" (Gilbert and Gubar: 10). What Andahazi's text criticises is the notion that the woman herself becomes a freak, literally a teranoma, "an aborted human being: a handful of hair, nails and teeth" (38). She is not a woman, not even human; feminine creative energy simply cannot be. When it is detected it is perceived as male-derived *and* demonised; says Lord Byron with regard to *Manfred*, the gothic poem resulting from the ghost-sessions competition: "judging by your literary production, my vital fluid seems to have filled you with my splendid inspiration. The child Manfred has all the qualities of his noble father. (...) I have no idea where your evil talent comes from" (185).

Byron's provoking declaration reinforces a view of women's bodies as mere biological *and* literary vessels: on the one hand of men's flowing vitality and, on the other, of their intellectual gifts. The view concurs with the dichotomy man/author and woman/reader, which has traditionally prevailed as it safeguards roles of agency and passivity. However it is undeniable that among all literary genres in the his/tory of literature, the female gothic has asserted its independence and consequence, and it has done so from early on not only with Mary Shelley but also prominently with the Radcliffean body of work. The gothic tradition of female authorship therefore has always existed but, as Andahazi demonstrates, it has been written out or pushed out of literary his/tory; noticeably, in Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith's recent volume, on the cover we see a young woman recoiling in fear, no doubt frightened by the horror stories she is *reading* in the book she still holds in her hands¹. But the controversy surrounding Ellen Moers's term "female gothic" (1976), and which referred simply to the work produced by women in that literary mode, reflects the necessity to rethink that corpus more attentively. Not only was it unreasonable to conceive of female authorship as a universal category (derived from a universal concept of femininity and therefore of an assumed homogeneous literary production) but also thematically variation occurred. Among them the female vampire has certainly been brought to the frontline, an element which Andahazi was obviously inspired by as well. That prominence, and given the always

¹ Also noticeably, the well-known cover of Alberto Manguel's *A History of Reading*, the acclaimed translator of many works from Spanish into English including *The Merciful Women*, shows Gustav Adolph Hennig's *Reading Girl* (1828).

present association in gothic fiction between vampirism and sexuality, created the favourable circumstance to the emergence of the lesbian gothic narrative. The sub-genre seems to explore taboos and rejoice in its specific female sexual “deviation” (or “monstrosity”), a theme dear to Andahazi too, and through the exclusion of masculinity, to defy traditional paradigms. However, in terms of its reception the phenomenon remains to be adequately studied; there is no clear indication whether the market of such tales is women (either heterosexual or lesbian) and whether such self-ghettoisation is beneficial in terms of empowerment (authorial and sexual agency). Moreover, it is arguable that these texts have really been capable of escaping the male grip as they seem to have been appropriated, particularly filmic texts, by the male gaze.

Andahazi has been able to avoid the stereotypification of femininity by discarding the model of the passive, beautiful but also often foolish woman who invariably falls prey to an evil influence. However, and quite problematically, he does so by offering the reader exactly the opposite: the monster. Nevertheless Andahazi dismantled the dichotomies man/author and woman/reader by focusing on *both* elements of authorship and readership regarding Annette. This sublimation of the female character can feel as being idealistic for Annette is more than just an avid reader; she is the possessor of an extraordinary mind which (obsessively) consumes the great classics and also does them interpretative justice (the beauty ideal is replaced by the intellectual one and they cannot coexist). The result of Andahazi’s own formulation of a feminine ideal through the device of doubleness creates a paranoid if not psychotic personality, which Alberto Manguel has well expressed in his Wildean annotations towards an ideal reader:

The ideal reader is the writer just before the words come together on the page.

The ideal reader exists in the moment that precedes the moment of creation.

The ideal reader does not reconstruct a story: he recreates it.

The ideal reader does not follow a story: he partakes of it. (...)

The ideal reader knows what the writer only intuitively.

The ideal reader subverts the text. The ideal reader does not take the writer’s word for granted.

The ideal reader is a cumulative reader: every time he reads a book he adds a new layer of memory to the narrative.

Every ideal reader is an associative reader. He reads as if all books were the work of one ageless and prolific author. (...)

The ideal reader is both generous and greedy. (...)

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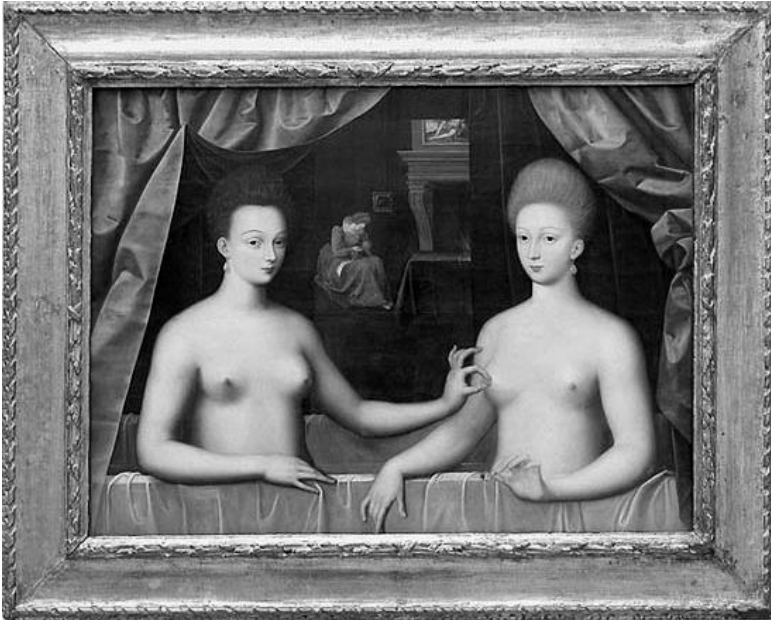
The ideal reader treads the beaten path. (...)
The ideal reader is a novel's main character.
(2008: no page. Italics added)

On fusing the reader and the writer, as Manguel postulates in this quote, Andahazi generates a monstrous god-like super-entity (hence also Annette's severance with human contact) whose Jekyll/Hyde identity is experienced as near madness. The reader of *The Merciful Women* can only speculate how Annette does not succumb to insanity when she is made to represent the construction of the literary process as a combination of readership and authorship. To draw on Manguel's blueprint, what is at stake is the loss of perfection as the word is materialised; the conflict between recreation, reconstruction and the myth of authenticity; knowledge versus intuition; subversion and questioning of literary authority; literary memory, accretion and hypertextuality: "every book has been engendered by long successions of other books whose covers you may never see and whose authors you may never know but which echo in the one you now hold in your hand", he wrote in *A History of Reading* (266). Manguel's literary recipe for ideal readership (and where he also postulates the translator as the ideal reader) is materialised in a single character in *The Merciful Women*². She is haunted, framed and sentenced by literature, renovating Gilbert and Gubar's model of the madwoman in the attic in her exilic state, on the one hand as a somatic monster and on the other as an almighty representation of the literary process of creation of meaning. The perfect Reading Machine is in the end a woman-author (though as man-made — by Andahazi — as the mechanical one) but more importantly it is a human. Jean-Luc Terradillos's definition of humans as reading animals seems especially well-suited to remember in connection with *The Merciful Women*. Or, to invoke and subvert a concept by another literary monster who Manguel read to in his final years, Jorge Luis Borges, humans are themselves total libraries. As such they can only exist as utopias or as unfinished projects for otherwise they would be crushed under the weight of totality. That is, they contradict the notion of universalism.

In *The Merciful Women* monstrosity has yet another manifestation. The only creative energy allowed to women is linked to a strict sense of morals written by men as they are framed/sentenced into (biological) motherhood. When that energy emerges out of the

² Manguel also has an interest in female gothicism as he has published a critical book on the bride of Frankenstein (1997).

prescribed context, women are qualified as moral monsters, as is the case of the beautiful Legrand twins. They are portrayed as promiscuous idiotic man-eaters, indulging in masturbation, orgies and even incest, portrayed that is, like Mary Shelley and her sister Claire (21-22). In one scene in particular the Legrands' actions leak out another *influential* reference (though I do not think it is an anxious one), *Gabrielle d'Estrées and One of Her Sisters* (c. 1594), where the viewer witnesses one caressing the other's nipples while a third female figure almost disappears at the back (Annette used to hide to either witness her sisters' sexual adventures or to wait for her opportunity to jump for the semen). Men on the other hand, proffer evidence of the opposite situation. It is Polidori who notes that Lord Byron's talent is equated with the vastness of his debauching aptitude.



Gabrielle d'Estrées and One of Her Sisters,
attributed to the School of Fontainebleau, circa 1594

Mary Shelley's male monster is Annette's creation, herself a female monster, thus materialising the scientist's fear of procreation while the procreative act itself had already taken place by the time Victor expressed it and initiated his exterminating operation; *Frankenstein's* monster has a different parent, but it is still a mother though simultaneously the embodiment of the female monster whom

Victor Frankenstein destroys. The female monster of *The Merciful Women* is therefore Frankenstein's monster's mother and lover in Annette/Mary Shelley's novel. But the matter needs to be discussed further: Andahazi an actual (male) writer creates a fictional (female) monster to give birth to Mary Shelley the writer-character who, in her turn, fictionally creates *Frankenstein's* (male) monster. Through accumulative layers of "authenticity" (demonstrative of post-structuralist premises) and fictionality Andahazi, as an Argentinean author, therefore an author outside the Western canon, assumes the authorship of that part of the canon related with the Gothic tradition.

In sum, Andahazi takes on the role of Victor Frankenstein as a god-like creator. Andahazi hovers therefore between "authenticity" and fictionality himself. Moreover, in the light of Harold Bloom's anxiety of influence thesis, Andahazi is haunted by his literary precursor, Mary Shelley; in an attempt to sublimate his anxiety and to create an original ("authentic") text he is led to recreate a key literary myth of origins, that legendary night. Moreover, the novel ends (as it had started) with a denial on Andahazi's part of the "authenticity" of this incredible story which was told to him by a teratologist in Copenhagen. And he turns the tables once again; as he affirms his disbelief, he confesses there is a black envelope on his desk, Annette's trademark. *The Merciful Women* has been written by Annette too and by making Andahazi an author in (not of) the novel, he is further pushed into fictionality. At the end only Annette, a fictional character, exists as an author, the mother of all anxieties of influence and living up to her own principle: "[t]here are millions of men in the world. And paternity is always a matter of doubt" (178).

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RESUMO: Embora a novela tenha apresentado o vampiro ao mundo literário inglês, *The Vampyre* (1819) de John Polidori consta na história como uma realização menor quando comparada com essa outra criação monstruosa, *Frankenstein* (1818), ambas apresentadas como resultado de uma competição entre Lord Byron, os Shelley e do secretário do primeiro, Polidori. Com *Las Piadosas / The Merciful Women* (1998), Federico Andahazi presta uma homenagem irônica ao *The Vampyre* e à literatura gótica em geral. No romance de Andahazi, o monstro é uma mulher-animal de espécie indefinida e de traços indefinidos. Utilizando a estética gótica no seu próprio romance, Andahazi interroga o universo literário a partir do seu interior ao abordar questões como a autoria e ansiedade femininas, a política sexual da indústria literária, o vampirismo metafórico nas perspectivas masculina e feminina e respectivos contextos sociais, e a animalidade feminina como um símbolo da forma negada de agência literária feminina.

ABSTRACT: Though the novella introduced the vampire to the English literary world, *The Vampyre* (1819) by John Polidori has gone down in history as a lesser achievement when compared to that other monstrous creation, *Frankenstein* (1818), both presented as the result of a group competition among Lord Byron, the Shelleys and the former's secretary, Polidori. With *Las Piadosas/ The Merciful Women* (1998), Federico Andahazi pays an ironic tribute to *The Vampyre* and to Gothic literature in general. In Andahazi's novel, the monster is an animal-woman of undefined species and elusive traits. Using gothic aesthetics in his own novel, Andahazi questions the literary universe from within on addressing issues such as female authorship and anxiety, the sexual politics of the literary industry, metaphoric male and female vampirism and their related social contexts, and female animalisation as a symbol of the rejected form of feminine literary performance.